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ABSTRACT

It is the purpose of this paper to suggest a role community assessment can play in the development of effective communication links between the public schools and the communities they serve, and to outline a process by which the public schools can develop their own community assessment activities. Community assessment, in the broader sense, can be viewed as a process and a strategy not only for gathering information but also for obtaining broad-based community involvement, for developing communication links to the community, for educating the community about schools, for defining "community," and for developing a continuous community sensory mechanism. (Author/MLF)

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COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT: TOWARD COMMUNITY RESPONSIVE SCHOOLS

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I. Introduction

Every social institution or organization is somehow imbedded in its social environment. Society itself is the superior agency into which institutions and organizations must articulate. To this end the public schools must develop effective ways of articulating with the communities they serve.

A basic articulation concern relates to how the public schools will assess community needs, aspirations and expectations. It is the purpose of this paper to suggest a role community assessment can play in the development of effective communication links between the public schools and the communities they serve, and to outline a process by which the public schools can develop their own community assessment activities.

II. Assessment as Communication

School administrators are faced with two seemingly incongruous tasks. developing two-way communication with the community and assessing community needs, aspirations and expectations. Viewed separately, assessment is seen as a one-way information gathering process. Its primary purpose is to obtain information needed in planning and decision-making activities. It becomes a discrete, short-term activity performed by a small number of people. To view assessment in this narrow sense is to miss the opportunity

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to use assessment as a primary mechanism for communication with an involvement of the community.

The community assessment process can provide the school district with the opportunity to:

1. develop a concept of "community".
2. gather pertinent planning data.
3. involve a cross section of the community in a meaningful activity that has rather immediate payoff.
4. establish lines of communication to all segments of the community.
5. educate community members regarding school district activities.
6. develop a continuous community sensory mechanism.

III. Developing a Sense of Community

Every school administrator makes some assumptions about the community served by the school district. Three basic assumptions need to be carefully examined by both the administrator and the community. These assumptions are:

1. a "community" exists.
2. the community believes it has a pivotal role in determining the kind of school it will have.
3. the community as an aggregate possesses the skills necessary to be effectively involved in school district decision making.

If these assumptions are valid, then effective articulation between school and community is possible.

An initial assessment task is the development of a concept of community that is acceptable to both school and community.

Conventional definitions of community emphasize three dimensions: the geographical, the psychological and the sociological. Communities are frequently identified by reference to geo-political boundaries, ethnic groups,

socio-economic classes, occupational classifications and areas of residence. Whatever the criterion used, what is stressed is some "common bond." The common bond defining a community will vary from community to community, depending in large measure upon historical and sociological factors. If community involvement is to be real, all parties concerned at some time or another must explore in detail what "community" means to them.

How does one arrive at a concept of community? It is not a difficult task at all. Mobilize a community task force and assign it the task of describing and defining the community served by the school. They can gather data that describes the community demographically, economically, politically, geographically and so forth. This description and definition process has several values. It causes the "community" to look at itself in a systematic and rigorous way. It will reveal the "common bonds" that make the community the "community." Secondly, it helps to develop a common perceptual base upon which meaningful communication can be built. A major objective of any assessment activity must be the development of common perceptual bases. Research and experience indicate that the quality of communication and understanding is directly related to the degree to which people share a common perceptual base.

IV. Gathering Planning Data

Effective planning is data based. Community assessment is a process used to generate planning data. The assessment process begins by asking four basic questions:

1. What do we want to know?
2. Why do we want to know it?
3. Who knows it or has the information?
4. How can the information be most economically and efficiently collected?

Before data can be collected it is most important to identify very clearly what information will be collected. There is nothing more useless than irrelevant data and nothing more frustrating than trying to use and interpret irrelevant data. To avoid such pitfalls it is necessary for the community assessment group to identify what information needs to be collected and to outline the reasons why the information is necessary.

Once the information has been identified and a rationale developed, the tasks of collection and analysis are more easily accomplished.

V. Involve a Cross-Section of the Community

The success or failure of a planning process, as experience has shown, is dependent upon how the people involved perceive the utility and effect of the plan. Assessment can be seen as a broad based involvement process. Involvement can take place in a variety of ways.

Involvement on a small scale begins with the community assessment committee. Once the what and why have been identified and described, larger participating can begin with the collection of the data.

In addition to using the mailed questionnaire method, personal interviews permit opportunities for face-to-face data collection.

Enlist the support of the P.T.A.'s or whatever groups exist, and ask them to supply personnel to do the interviews. One of the last interview questions could be "would you be willing to help us by interviewing five citizens?" By this method more interviewers can be obtained. If a "scientific" sampling is sought, the above method will cause some problems but they are hardly insurmountable. Students too can be enlisted to do interviews.

Another personal technique might be to hand deliver the questionnaires, indicate you'll be back in a day or two to collect the completed form. When

the questionnaire is retrieved, ask the interviewee if there were any questions/concerns or ideas that they might want to discuss.

In the initial stages of community assessment it is important to give a large segment of the community the opportunity to respond to the issues being explored. A combination of mailed or widely distributed questionnaires and personal interviews should be used. Remember that personal contacts are fundamental to effective communication.

By giving large numbers of community members an opportunity to respond to information items and by reporting back the results of the assessment rather immediately, communication lines may be opened. The assessment process by asking people for information may arouse their interests and curiosity in what's going on. Immediate feedback of the data provides another opportunity to communicate.

VI. Educating the Community

The information gathering process is also an information sharing process. The issues raised in the assessment and the type of information sought provide the community with information about what is going on. It gives the community clues to what the school is thinking about. The educational potential of the assessment process should not be overlooked.

VII. Developing a Continuous Sensory Mechanism

If schools wish to be responsive to the needs, aspirations and expectations of the communities they serve, then they will need to develop a sensory mechanism that continuously provides data on community needs, aspirations and expectations. The assessment process outlined above is such a sensory mechanism. It can be operated on a year around basis with the community providing the major portion of the work force.

VIII. Summary

Community assessment can be viewed in two ways. In the narrow sense it can be viewed as simply an information gathering process. In the broader sense it can be viewed as a process and a strategy for not only gathering information but also for obtaining broad based community involvement, for developing communication links to the community, for educating the community about schools, for defining "community", and for developing a continuous community sensory mechanism.